

Malaysia's blind can 'see' with OOXML

By [Lee Min Keong](#), ZDNet Asia

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KUALA LUMPUR--Microsoft launched a new tool that allows users with assistive needs to convert Office Word files into documents that "speak".

Developed on Microsoft's [Office Open XML](#) (OOXML) standard, the new plug-in aims to make documents more easily accessible for the visually-impaired community, estimated to be 160 million worldwide.

Dubbed "Save As DAISY XML", the plug-in helps translate Word files into a "talking" digital book format. The functionality allows users to save Open XML-based text files as DAISY XML documents, and supports Microsoft Word 2007, Word 2003 and Word XP.

Microsoft recently launched the new tool in Malaysia, in collaboration with the [National Council for the Blind, Malaysia](#) (NCBM). The tool was developed as an [open source application](#) with Sonata software and the [Digital Accessible Information System](#) (Daisy) consortium. It translates OOXML files into the Daisy format, which can then be used in software such as Book Wizard Producer and the Daisy pipeline, to create a talking book.

The tool is available for download on the [Open XML Community](#) Web site.

Daisy documents allow visually-impaired users to perform tasks like a sighted person, such as skipping to specific page numbers, listening to a table of contents and looking up references in an index.

Microsoft Malaysia's national technology officer, Dzahar Mansor, said the Open Microsoft initiative, which seeks to foster openness and interoperability, has enabled Microsoft to "address the needs for this special community through standards and software, in a practical and useful way".

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With the pervasive use of Word, he said the tool represents a giant leap forward in making information available to all. The effort is part of Microsoft's Unlimited Potential initiative to help bridge the digital divide through technology, he added.

With the new tool, he noted that some 600 visually-impaired people in Malaysia who use Word, will be able to experience immediate benefits. Dzahar said: "Because Microsoft Word is a commonly-used application, this add-in allows for content creators in different fields to produce accessible digital material by, and for Malaysians, especially individuals with assistive needs".

"Insurance and healthcare organizations or those that publish training manuals will also be able to make their information accessible to Malaysians with different needs," he added.

NCBM President S. Kulasegaran said individuals with special needs have, in recent decades, increasingly accessed information using a wide variety of assistive technologies such as screen readers, large print, refreshable Braille and text-to-speech synthesizers.

However, Kulasegaran noted, as it was not possible to navigate complex page layouts, they often struggle to keep up with the demands of today's increasingly information-dependent society. He added that 'Save As DAISY XML' now makes it possible to navigate documents quickly by heading or page numbers, and to use indices and references.

"The add-in not only provides access to an unprecedented amount of data and documents that was previously unavailable, but also provides the ease of finding information needed within those documents," said Kulasegaran at the launch.

He added there have been specific challenges that universities and public institutions face in providing books and materials for those who cannot read. "The 'Save As DAISY XML' feature within Microsoft Word can reduce the expense, and increase the ease of delivering accessible content to Malaysians who require it," he said.

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